

## A Messy Divorce

**P**eople who think there is nothing new to be said about Lithuania just never met Kazimiera Prunskiene, an authentic political personality who came here last week and delicately readjusted the focus of all she met.

The prime minister is a sturdy Slav with hazel eyes, dimples and a strong jaw. She also has a good head. She knew she was cast as the scourge of wicked Mikhail Gorbachev, who turned off the gas in her native country.

But she played nanny instead of nag, and threw everybody off. Gorbachev is no heavy, he is just someone who needs to have his better nature appealed to. He is her old debating partner—they spent a lot of time talking in the Soviet Congress, from which she withdrew when Lithuania declared its independence. She explained that Gorbachev is logical, a lawyer, who can see that the breakaway is the logical and inevitable outcome of *perestroika*. She has great faith in his ability to work his way through his present dilemma.

She has a gift for seeing someone else's difficulties and converting them to her own uses.

For instance, George Bush was having lots of trouble about her visit. He didn't want her giving herself airs as a prime minister—we don't recognize a free Lithuania—and someone in the White House went to clumsy lengths to make the point.

The prime minister got a charwoman's welcome at the northwest gate. Her limousine was not allowed inside, nor was her brother. Her handbag was searched, she had to show her passport. No one greeted her at the door. It was the kind of thing that could bend your ordinary public figure out of shape.

"Oh," she said airily at a dinner given by Christopher Matthews, bureau chief of the San Francisco Examiner, "I didn't think anything of it. I thought it was just the American way."

Before she got here, Prunskiene was thought of as a heroine in a 19th century Russian novel, an attractive woman trapped in a rotten marriage. For years, everyone had urged her to leave. Do it, they said, we will help you. But when she did it, everyone started singing a different tune.

"Oh, my dear," said those friendly nations, "don't you think you're being a little hasty? You know how he is, he will be so cut up he could get sick, die even. And what will you do for money? Shouldn't you reconsider?"

But Prunskiene shies away from the

bitter rhetorical condemnation of Lithuania's president, Vytautas Landsbergis, who compared the official U.S. position to Munich, the symbol of appeasement. "When people are disappointed, they sometimes use extreme language," she said. And added that it was not the attitude of the Lithuanian people, any more than Landsbergis is president of the country, "just president of the Parliament."

Talking to her, you can see how she and Gorbachev would get along. Both are reformed communists, both are exceptionally intelligent and they enjoy discussion of abstractions like reform and democratization.

"We are not bored when we talk to each other," she said. "We are able to engage in discussions and not become angry. I don't give in to him. I don't make any effort to make fun of him or offend him in any way."

"He is dynamic, receptive to ideas, a very good listener and pleasant to be around," she said of the man who is trying to choke her country.

Is he arrogant, she is asked.

"Sufficiently," she says dryly, light eyes sparkling.

Bush did not show any vulgar curiosity about his summit partner. All he wanted to know about were his chances of survival. Prunskiene told the president that Gorbachev is a big boy and can survive the Lithuanian divorce.

On Capitol Hill, Prunskiene "made a lot of converts," says Rep. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.). Conservatives are, of course, furious at Bush's tilt towards Moscow. Liberals are vaguely guilty because they know that Lithuania should not be asked to rescind its declaration of independence for the sake of the summit.

But she put them at ease, by assuring them that they did not have to feel sorry for her. She's doing fine, she told them. While she was here, Margaret Thatcher called to make a date in London, and there were calls from Paris and Bonn as well. They are helping her to internationalize the problem, to persuade the world that it has a stake in the outcome in Vilnius. The Baltic states are unique: Their fate was unlawfully sealed by the Hitler-Stalin pact.

The last time she saw Gorbachev was Feb. 27, days before the Lithuanians took the plunge. He told her they would probably meet again, "accidentally" at some international conference.

"Yes, we will meet again at some international conference," she told him in her ebullient fashion. "But it won't be by accident."